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Archaeologists trained or working in the Americas have long been interested in the relations of ancient societies to the landscapes they created and inhabited. These spaces—their natural features, settlements, ruins, and resources—are infused with meaning. Archaeologists have conceptualized and sought to understand the significance of landscapes in various ways. As Knapp and Ashmore (1999: 1) have noted, what has changed significantly in the last decade is how they think about the place of landscapes in the theory and practice of archaeology.

Most Americanist archaeologists are familiar with the writings of geographers on landscapes, broadly defined. There are four reasons for this. The first results from the interconnections of archaeology, anthropology, and geography in 19th-century Germany, echoes of which still reverberate today (e.g., Marchand 1996; Ryding 1975; Smith 1991). The second is the historic linkage of archaeology and anthropology in university curricula throughout the Western Hemisphere. The third is the important role that anthropology, archaeology, and geography played in the development of area studies programs from the late 1930s onward (Steward 1950; Wallerstein et al. 1996: 36–48). The fourth reflects the sequential publication of three widely cited compendia, each with significant articles on the cultural, physical, and historical geography of the hemisphere: the Handbook of South American Indians (Steward 1944–1959); the Handbook of Middle American Indians (Wauchope 1964–1975); and the Handbook of North American Indians (Sturtevant 1978–onward). Furthermore, many Americanists were also acquainted to varying degrees and in different ways with the writings of particular geographers such as Carl Sauer (1925/1963), William Denevan (1966, 1992), and Karl Butzer (1982), to name only three.

Americanist Conceptions of Archaeological Landscapes

In the last 70 years, Americanist archaeologists have conceptualized landscape in at least seven different ways that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. These perspectives see them as (1) ecological habitats; (2) settlement patterns; (3) subsistence-settlement systems; (4) encompassing both the terrestrial and celestial spheres; (5) materializations of worldview; (6) built or marked environments; and (7) stages for performance.

Ecological Habitats

This perspective views landscapes as the ecological theater in which the drama of everyday life has been performed and involves a cultural or human
ecology that focuses on the interaction of communities and their physical environment (Sanders 1962, 1963; Wedel 1953). In some studies, archaeologists saw environmental landscapes as playing roles that shaped, limited, or determined the ways in which the drama of everyday life was or even could be performed (Meggers 1954); here, the actors either adapted to the environmental setting in which they lived or transformed it in some manner, usually through the development or adoption of agriculture (Flannery 1968; MacNeish 1971; Moseley 1975; Murra 1972, 1985; Napton 1969; Steward 1930).

Other studies sought to determine the structure and conditions of the environmental setting in which the everyday life of a particular ancient community was enacted (Johnson 1942). Some viewed these settings as dynamic ones that changed through time; others assumed, often implicitly, that distributional features of the modern landscape were more or less representative of past distributions and that landforms themselves had not been affected in any significant way by erosion or postdepositional burial; more than a few studies combined these potentially incommensurate viewpoints, while others have critiqued that stance as oversight (Joyce and Mueller 1997; Lanning 1963; MacNeish et al. 1983). In recent years, archaeologists are beginning to point out how dramatically ancient peoples transformed their environmental settings and built the landscapes in which they lived (Erickson 2000).

**Settlement Patterns**

Here, landscapes are viewed in terms of settlement patterns, which Gordon Willey (1953: 1), in the foundational work of this viewpoint, defined as the way in which man disposed himself over the landscape in which he lived. It refers to the dwelling, to their arrangement, and to the nature and disposition of other buildings pertaining to community life. These settlements reflect the natural environment, the level of technology on which the builders operated, and various institutions of social interaction and control which the culture maintained.

Regional settlement pattern studies in the Americas multiplied steadily from the late 1950s onward after Willey’s initial formulation of the perspective (Ashmore 1981; Lekson 1991; Parsons 1972; Sanders, Parsons, and Santley 1979; Smith 1978; Willey 1956). Willey’s definition of settlement archaeologists the opportunity to pursue studies concerned with both the relationships of people to their ecological settings and their social relationships with one another. It was also not wed to a particular social-theoretical standpoint (although Willey had one), but rather to the collection and analysis of empirical evidence. New questions, methodological innovations, and clarifications of theoretical standpoint and of the interrelationships of theory and data followed in its wake.

These post-1950s approaches to regional settlement strategies reflect archaeology’s appropriation of logical positivism and neoclassical economic models, on the one hand, and reactions to them, on the other. Notable areas of debate were concerned with the interconnections of settlement systems and subsistence activities (Flannery 1976; Struwever 1971), settlement patterns as expressions of social inequality (Crumley 1976, 1979; Paynter 1982), and the ongoing interrelations of groups residing in different regions (Gledhill 1978; Mathien and McGuire 1986; MacNeish, Patterson, and Browman 1975; Schortman and Urban 1992).

**Subsistence-Settlement Systems**

The third perspective, which is concerned with the relationships between subsistence activities of a past community and their environment, does not see landscape exclusively in terms of settlement (Thomas 1975). This view was elaborated from the mid-1970s onward and took traditional notions of an archaeological site as problematic. The problem of archaeological practice that arose when traditional definitions were implemented was that most sites in a traditional sense represent domestic or activity loci from which the exploitation of the surrounding environment took place. Using site to structure recovery limits data collection to a small fraction of the total area occupied by any past cultural system and systematically excludes nearly all direct evidence of the actual articulation between people and their environment. As a result, we are forced to puzzle out the connections from the grossly incomplete, complex, multifunctional deposits called sites. (Dunnell and Dancey 1983: 271–72)

Important consequences of this perspective were a shift of attention away from the settlements themselves to the larger environmental settings in which they were situated and a refocusing of attention on “the distribution of archaeological...
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Integrating the Terrestrial and Celestial Spheres

Archaeoastronomers extended the notion of landscape beyond terrestrial, aquatic, and underground environments to include the skies, as well as the cyclical and long-term changes that occur in the heavens. Although there are clear connections with scattered, earlier writings on the astronomies of pre-Columbian societies (Browditch, 1910; Nuttall 1906; Posnansky 1942), the perspective gained new levels of credibility in the late 1970s and early 1980s as the significance of the cosmos was understood in new ways. This was largely a result of astronomer Anthony Aveni’s collaborative projects with archaeologists and anthropologists (Aveni 1975, 1977, 2001; Aveni and Urton 1982). Since that time, it has fueled a steadily growing number of important studies throughout the Americas (Aveni 2003).

Extending landscape to the celestial sphere and to periodic astronomical events—such as the rising or the setting of the sun or the moon, as well as various planets and stars on the horizon, or the visibility of particular constellations (which are cultural constructions)—afford new insights into the timing and significance of practices (of daily, annual, or longer cyclical duration) and their meaning in terms of particular belief systems. In some instances, ancient societies oriented structures—like the medicine wheels sites on the Great Plains, the “woodhenges” associated with Cahokia near St. Louis, or the diversity of astrophysical features in Chaco Canyon—to mark astronomical events (Eddy 1977; Kehoe and Kehoe 1977; studies are closely related to other investigations that were concerned primarily with the calendric organization of work and with cosmology (Coggins 1980; Freidel et al. 1993; Sherbondy 1977, 1986; Urton 1982; Zuidema 1982).

Materializations of Worldview

This perspective, which crystallized in the late 1980s, is concerned with the ways in which worldview, cosmology, and history are materialized and expressed in the plans of buildings, civic centers, and settlements as well as in archaeological landscapes themselves (Ashmore 1986, 1989, 1991; Ashmore and Sabloff 2002; Brady and Ashmore 1999; Coggins 1967; Lekson 1999; Snead and Preucel 1999; Sugiyama 1993). In this perspective, civic plans and landscapes are seen as complex spatial manifestations of culturally and historically contingent views about the cosmological order. Here, features of the natural environment, as well as buildings, gain significance as the peoples who inhabited those places continually incorporated them into their ideational landscapes, assigned meanings to them, and transformed them in the process. Thus, buildings, civic centers, and even the landscapes themselves are seen as “works in progress” that were continually under construction and, sometimes never completed.

The range of studies making use of this conceptualization of landscapes is quite broad. This breadth encompasses studies of the cultural meanings that people assigned to features of their landscapes—such as fields, forests, mountains, caves, springs, or the abundance of spiders during particular times of the year (Salazar-Burger and Burger 1983; Schele and Freidel 1990; Taube 2003); investigations of the continuities and changes in the spatial order of civic plans as revealed by their superposition (Ashmore and Sabloff 2002); examinations of the roles ancestors and cemeteries played in the construction of community (Buikstra and Charles 1999); and considerations of resistance as identities were constructed, reproduced, renewed, and changed over periods of time of greater or lesser duration (Preucel 2002).

Built or Marked Environments

The recognition of landscapes as marked or built environments that developed in the 1980s had roots in earlier research. For example, studies of rock art in the Americas originate in 19th-century commentaries (Bostwick 2001; Bray 2002; Greer 2001; Schobinger and Strecker 2001; Turpin 2001;
management archaeology in the 1970s and the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA) fueled growing interest in rock art in the United States and also helped to underwrite new relationships between archaeologists and Indian peoples. The interpretation of rock art has involved diverse theoretical standpoints ranging from empiricism and structuralism, on the one hand, to symbolic and neuropsychological approaches, on the other. American rock art involves an array of images and scenes, many of which commemorated significant events for the artists and peoples who made them—for example, representations in the American Southwest of the supernova that occurred in A.D. 1054 (Brandt and Williamson 1977).

If rock art is viewed as dotting a landscape, then geoglyphs, such as the famous Nazca Lines (ca. 200 B.C.–A.D. 500) of coastal Peru, mark the landscape even more dramatically. These geoglyphs, some of which are nearly 300 meters in length, structure the interfluvial environment between the Nazca and Ingenio Valleys (Aveni 2000; Silverman and Proulx 2002: 163–92); they have been viewed in terms of a series of potentially complementary interpretations—most notably ceremonial roads, arenas for performance, and physical and cognitive maps of subsurface water (Johnson 1999; Johnson et al. 2002).

If rock art marks one end of an imaginary spectrum and the Nazca Lines some middle point, then the heavily modified environments of Amazonian lowlands or the Titicaca Basin in southern Peru and northern Bolivia (ca. 500 B.C. onward) represent the other extreme. For more than 50 years, scholars have noted the existence of almost continuous deposits of “man-made” soils along many rivers in the Amazon basin (Lathrap 1968; Sauer 1950, 1952). Clark Erickson (2000) has suggested that the amount of labor involved in the construction of agricultural terraces, field walls, canals, reservoirs, roads, raised fields, irrigated pastures, and sunken gardens in the Lake Titicaca Basin far exceeds the time and effort that were required to build all the ceremonial centers in the region.

**Landscapes as Stages for Performance**

The final perspective comes full circle and returns to the “theater-play” metaphor, although the allusions and meanings of the metaphor have changed dramatically. Here landscape is seen as a space of public performance, the transcendence of the ordinary, communication, and the cultural reproduction of ritual, impersonation, movement, and meaning, on the one hand, and sights, sounds, smells, textures, light intensities, temperatures, humidities, and so forth, on the other. This view began to emerge in the late 1990s, although it also has roots in early works (Burger and Salazar-Burger 1998; Carrasco 1991; Inomata and Coben 2006; Moore 2004; Stone 1992).

These spaces of performance are diverse. Two examples provide a glimpse into the range of landscapes that have been conceptualized in this manner. For instance, each year the peoples of Huarochirí in Peru participated in a series of ceremonies that took place at shrines located from the humid, overcast coastal plain and sunny, dry mid-valleys to the windswept alpine grasslands of the Andes Mountains in central Peru; these were highly charged performances that reaffirmed identity, political relations, and tensions with both kin and neighbors (Spalding 1984). A second example consists of the theaters of power that were replicated at provincial Inca capitals scattered throughout the imperial state that stretched from northern Ecuador to central Chile and northwestern Argentina (Coben 2006). The writers who are currently developing and refining this perspective draw inspiration from various theoretical standpoints: performance theory, Peircean semiotics, phenomenology, and Marxism, to name only a few.

**Conclusions**

This survey of landscape archaeology in the Americas indicates that it has developed in diverse directions over the past 70 years. It also suggests that the proliferation of perspectives has been especially dramatic since the mid to late 1970s. This is undoubtedly correlated with the elaboration of both internal and external critiques of processual archaeology such as behavioral archaeology, on the one hand, and various postpositivist standpoints, on the other (Preucel 1995). These critiques provided the theoretical, epistemological, and conceptual space that was required to think about landscapes in new ways, to move away from perspectives that saw landscapes largely or exclusively in terms of ecology or settlements. This shift was most dramatic in the United States where processual archaeology has been an important standpoint, if not the hegemonic one, since the late 1950s, and less dramatic in Latin American countries, where processualism was at best only one of a series of competing viewpoints and was never a domi...
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